

COMPETITIVE STRATEGIES OF SELECTED QUANTITY SURVEYING FIRMS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Every profession must evolve in response to the ever increasing changes in the global business environment. The professional service firms in the quantity surveying profession cannot be absolved from this challenge, and thus the need for a strategic approach towards sustaining and advancing their competitiveness drives. However, insights into how these firms address and approach competitiveness in their operating environment is elusive and therefore remains a research issue. This two-staged research started with a step by step diagnosis of 74 Quantity Surveying firms (QSFs) in Lagos, Nigeria for their strategic potential, which is a requirement for the second stage of the research. After carrying out the diagnosis of the strategy potentials of mission statement, organisation objective, internal and external organisation analysis, 15 (20.27%) were adjudged to be strategic enough, and thus were administered well-structured questionnaires. The responses of senior level managers in these firms on the factors influencing the choice of competitive strategies; pervasiveness of the different types of competitive strategies; and the factors used in evaluating the performance of the competitive strategies were subjected to statistical analysis of mean score, frequency and effectiveness indexes and spearman rank correlation. The findings reveal that innovation, strategic formulation, characteristics of firm's organisation and external consideration are used in selecting the types of competitive strategies in the selected QSFs. Differentiation, cost leadership, growth and focus strategies are the competitive strategies adopted and operational in the firms, indicating that the firms operate a hybrid type of competitive strategy. The factors used in the firms for evaluating the performance of the choice of competitive strategy are quality of service, innovativeness, timeliness and cost reduction. However, only innovativeness has a significant correlation with both differentiation and growth strategies. The findings have considerable theoretical implications for competitive strategy theory and practical implications for the management of QSFs in Nigeria.

KEYWORDS: Competitive Strategy, Quantity Surveying Firms, Competitiveness, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Strategies and strategising are mostly concepts reinforced in the organisational context, with concerns bothering on determining a desired future state and mechanisms by which goals may be reached. Murphy (2011) expresses that strategising is crucial to the success of firms operating in competitive environment. According to El Kelety (2006), firms have responded to the changes in business in many ways, including reengineering operational processes, downsizing the workforce, outsourcing service functions, and developing smaller, more efficient, and more society responsible organizational policies and structures. Furthermore, they have attempted to become adaptable as the pace of change

increases and are also beginning to make use cost management to support their strategic goals. In terms of competitiveness in an environment, the construction industry is no exemption, where there's keen competition for survival and sustenance (Ojo, 2011). Yu (2007) describes the competition in the construction industry as fiercer and unpredictable, no matter what the type of the firm. The fiery competition of the construction industry may have prompted Smith (2010) to advise firms in all sectors of the construction industry on the need to work smarter to gain competitive advantage, having observed that the current industry procurement and technological trends clearly indicate that firms who are unable to re-engineer their work practices to evolve with these trends will find it increasingly difficult to survive in a meaningful and profitable form. In light of this, this research focuses on competitive strategies in Nigerian Quantity Surveying firms (QSFs) so as to clarify their strategic positioning and surviving practices, QSFs being professional service firms in the construction industry (Page, Pryke and Pearson, 2004).

Globally, Quantity Surveying practice has been seen to be indifferent to competitive drives. Even though, despite being recognised as a professional discipline distinct from architecture and civil engineering since 1836, quantity surveyors are not immune to the threats and changes in their operating environment (Shafiei and Said, 2008), leading to some parties in the construction industry being critical about the quality of works and services provided by quantity surveyors while others even question the importance of appointing quantity surveyors as project consultants. Specifically and in countries where Quantity Surveying practice are well grounded such as Australia, increasingly international competition, fee cutting and bidding amongst firms, professional indemnity insurance cases, conservatism and inability to change, encroachment, poor marketing and automation are the identified threats to QSFs market position (Smith, 2010), while in New Zealand, threats to the profession were perceived as acute shortage of skills, lack of recognition of the role of the Quantity Surveyor, market down-turn, use of nontraditional procurement systems and unrealistic expectations by clients (Frei and Mbachu, 2009). In Nigeria, the unaffirmative competitive posture of QSFs may have led to what Oyediran (2011) observed to be quantity QSFs totally relying on their architecture counterparts for job commission, and calls for strategic modification and redefinition to address such second-fiddle practice. These problems are far reaching and thus require that they be approached strategically to attain competitive and performing QSFs.

Competitive strategy is the choice of how an organization or business unit is going to compete in its particular industry or market (El Kelety, 2006). It is concerned with how a company competes in a particular business and gains a competitive advantage through a distinctive way of competing (Rao and Soumya, 2007). In the construction industry, competitive strategy will set a benchmark for a firm to secure long-term competitiveness (Abidin, Yusof, Hassan and Adros, 2011). These assertions are in line with Frei and Mbachu (2009)'s advocacy to the Quantity Surveying practice on the need to scan and discern future directions and actively prepare for any impending changes. Concerning changes, all organization deals with a changing environment and so, how the firms succeed or fail may be a valuable question to investigate (Yu, 2007). Murphy (2011) further adds that it is within the context of a changing environment and intense competition that strategic choice is considered. Yet for QSFs in Nigeria, there remains a dearth of information as regards the type, scope, approach and characteristics of strategic decision making within (Murphy, 2011). This research therefore describes the competitive strategic positioning of QSFs in Nigeria with a view to gaining insights into how the firms address and approach competitiveness in their operating environment. In achieving this goal, the factors that influence the choice of competitive strategies, the types of competitive strategies and the factors used in evaluating competitive strategies were elicited using the described methodology.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Factors Influencing the Choice of Competitive Strategies

The factors influencing the choice of competitive strategies in QSFs are identified and described below in line with Abidin et al. (2011).

Innovation

Referring to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Atkinson (2013) points innovation to be the implementation of a new or significantly improved product (that is, a physical good or service), process, a new marketing method, or a new organizational method in business practices, workplace organization, or external relations. Thus innovative organisations are differentiated because of their tendency to be novel. In Abidin et al. (2011), differentiation, which is all about product/service uniqueness, is a competitive strategy for organisations. That is, the novelty of organisations differentiate them, and therefore becomes a competitive advantage. Innovation among professional service providers in the construction sector are categorised into market, service, organisational, process and resource innovations (Page et al., 2004).

Characteristics of the Organisation

The choice of competitive strategy is influenced by some distinct characteristics of the parent organisation. These characteristics include firms' size, location and organisational structure. For instance, smaller organisations, due to their smallness tend to focus on specific market niche, e.g. a QSF that only renders pre-contract service, or maintain the same client for a long term. In this case, it could be seen that the size of the organisation informs the decision to focus on specific market or maintain the same client for a long term. This approach is analogous to Abidin et al. (2011)'s focus competitive strategy.

Strategy Formulation of Firms

The essence of strategy formulation is coping with competition (Porter, 1990). Strategic formulation means the formalized approach adopted in carrying the firm's goals and to gain competitive advantage. It is also the set of managerial decisions and actions that determines the long-run performance of a corporation (Wheelen and Hunger, 2002 cited in Flanagan, Lu, Shen and Jewell, 2007). Strategic formulation of firms are reflected in firms' objectives/mission, vision, operational mechanism (management structure) and consciousness of knowledge management. El-Kelety (2011) states that organizations simply cannot survive if they do not know where they are going and what they are all about (mission), and further reiterates that an organization without objectives is an organization without direction.

External Considerations

External considerations in the choice of competitive strategy bother on the concerns that are outside the organisational boundary. As a drive for competitive advantage, Yu (2007) advises that organizations should recognize their external environment quickly so as to take the corresponding actions. Also, Ofori (1993) emphasises on the creation of conducive environment for companies searching for competitive advantage by the government. These suggest that the environment where an organisation is operating is important to its success, and the recognition and/or understanding of the environment informs their action or strategy. In this paper, external considerations include legislations, state of the economy and level of technological advancement. In Nigeria, 75 percent of QSFs are based in Lagos State because of her favourable state of economy (Fagbemi, 2008). That is, as a matter of external consideration, most QSFs in Nigeria may have strategically positioned themselves in Lagos State.

Competitive Strategies and Firms' Success (Michael Porter's Competitive Strategies)

Michael Porter's core field is strategy, and this remains a primary focus of his research (Anupkuma, 2005). According to Lu, Shem and Yam (2008), Porter's theory is useful in understanding the competitiveness of organisations, suggesting that competitive advantage stems from the competitive strategy adopted to deal with the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing an organization. Anupkuma (2005) states that Porter (1980)'s strategic theory postulates that to succeed in business, a firm needs to adopt generic competitive strategies comprising cost leadership, differentiation, and focus. With a low-cost strategy, a firm can improve its competitive stance by lowering its production and marketing costs. When a firm adopts the differentiation strategy, it differentiates itself from competitors by providing unique products and services combined with creative marketing. Furthermore, a firm may achieve a strategic advantage by focusing on a niche market instead of competing broadly in the market. The inroad of Michael Porter's theory on competitive strategy to the business and research was after his landmark book '*Competitive Strategy*' in 1980 (Flanagan et al., 2007), and since then Michael Porter's research on strategy has attracted wide interest globally, as evident in the literatures. Some of these researches include Ofori (1994), Rindova and Fombrun (1999), Koskela (2000), Ling and Gui (2009) and Markus (2008). There are also construction related researches that have adopted, or give cognizance to the Michael Porter's competitive strategy concept. They include Cheah, Kang and Chew, (2007), Li, Li, Skitmore, Wai Wong and Cheng (2009) and Kao, Green and Larsen (2009). Specifically and in the investigation of how Chinese Architectural, Engineering and Construction firms can achieve profitability, Li and Ling (2012) use the Porter's generic competitive strategies as one of the concepts for explaining the profitability of the Chinese firms.

Owing to the popularity of Michael Porter's competitive strategy in the construction related researches, it is now being adopted in this research to describe the competitive strategy of QSFs in Nigeria. It could be argued that this research is focused on professional service firms (QSFs), as against construction firms which are the popular focus in competitive strategy researches in construction. However, the research of Abidin et al. (2011) carefully explained that Michael Porter's competitive strategies of cost leadership, differentiation and focus are applicable in QSFs. The research also pointed to Warszawski (1996), who after analysing Porter's three generic strategies in the construction industry introduced a fourth strategy, *growth*. The growth strategy is in form of increasing firm's market share or expanding markets (Abidin et al., 2011). Another reason why Michael Porter's strategies are used in this research is that; for a single business firm, their strategies are either at corporate/business or functional levels, where Porter's strategies are applicable (Tan, Shen and Langston, 2010). QSFs in Nigeria are known to provide solely quantity surveying services, and competitive approaches in the QSFs are addressed at the management (corporate) levels. Michael Porter's three generic strategies (cost leadership, differentiation and focus) and Warszawski (1996)'s focus strategy are described below, with extracts from other literatures to achieve a robust review. The descriptions also include how each of the strategies contributes to the success of the QSFs.

Cost Leadership Strategy

This category of strategy seeks to improve efficiency and control costs throughout the organization's supply chain (El-Kelety, 2006). Since competitive advantage is a function of either providing comparable buyer value more efficiently than competitors (low cost) (Anupkuma, 2005), cost leadership strategy requires management to focus its attention on competing on cost (Cheah et al., 2007). In this research, cost leadership is in terms of lower fees to attract clients, high quality personnel training and re-training of employees so as to achieve competitive edge, efficient but less expensive performance in the course of service delivery and ICT based performance that allows higher output per unit input. According to Murphy (2011), cost leadership strategy is prevalent in the construction industry by virtue of increased tender

price competition, which is part of the competitive tendering process. This strategy ensures the competitive advantage of QSFs by creating an edge in resources use e.g. training of personnel and technological advancement which offer more efficient and less expensive performance (Abidin et al., 2011).

Differentiation Strategy

A firm differentiates itself from competitors if it can be unique at something that is valuable to customers (Koskela, 2000). Differentiation occurs when a firm tries to make the product/service more appealing to the customer than the competition thereby potentially commanding a higher price (Murphy, 2011). The higher price here is an advantage that comes with the adoption of differentiation strategy. Thus, differentiation strategy is concerned with creating something that is perceived by the buyers as unique (Cheah et al., 2007). Organizations that pursue this strategy design their products to possess one or a number of the attributes which are of value to the customer and which make their products *stand out* from their competitors (Koskela, 2000). In this paper and considering the operation of QSFs in Nigeria, differentiation strategy was operationalised in terms of proactivity in identifying client's requirement to ensure good relationship, innovative approach to services provided to enhance its quality, strongly emphasising on superior use of time, maintenance of strong marketing capability and financial standing, accurate and timely cost advice to clients and encouraged employee socialisation within and outside the firm to improve on technical expertise (Abidin, et al., 2011).

Focus Strategy

A focused strategy implies that an organisation would compete in only limited functions or market segments (Cheah et al., 2007). Examples of which for QS practices may include focusing on a specific sector (e.g. private non-residential construction), geographical area or developing a specialist expertise (e.g. sustainable construction) (Murphy, 2011). This focus or scope is further divided into market/product (e.g. construction of residential and commercial buildings, civil works, environmental engineering, industrial and infrastructure projects), geography (e.g. diversification into domestic, regional and international markets) and function (e.g. this relates to the vertical integration of different functions with a value system) (Cheah et al., 2007). El-Kelety (2006) states that organizations operating focus strategy have adopted the opinion that, '*it is better to be a big fish in a small pond, rather than a minor swimming with whales*'. This means that firms adopting this strategy are comfortable with the competitive advantage derivable from focusing solely on a particular market niche, size and volume notwithstanding. Abidin et al. (2011) however warn that focus strategy will hinder the firms' movement if they have a vision to internationalize their firms.

Growth Strategy

This strategy emanated from the analysis of Michael Porter's generic strategies by Warszawski (1996). According to Abidin et al. (2011), this strategy is suitable if organisations are expanding internationally or locally. Thus by having more than a firm in the different area or country, the position of the firm is more established and able to mark their names in industry thus making more profits (Abidin et al., 2011). However, it is reasonable for firms who wanted to apply this strategy to be aware of the challenges in a new environment and competition from other international firms in order to get projects. QSFs that engage in a new business such as strategic alliance and offer new services to clients will have applied growth strategy.

Factors used in Evaluating the Performance of the Competitive Strategies

Abidin et al. (2011) note that it is necessary for QSFs to evaluate whether the strategy(ies) applied are matched with the firm's working environment so as to have basis for probable modification or revision of the adopted strategy(ies).

QSFs's quality of service to clients, the level of their innovative drives, superior use of time and cost reduction in construction operations and administrative activities are the means of evaluating the performance of adopted competitive strategies. These factors are described below:

Quality of Service

The process by which customers perceive satisfaction and overall service quality is regarded by many as the key to understanding service quality (Sui, Bridge and Skitmore, 2001). QSFs' clients (customers) in Nigeria are predominantly from the construction sector, and the quality of services rendered are based on the expectations of the clients. These expectations are mostly stated in terms and conditions of engaging the QSFs. The argument in this paper is that the quality of service experienced by the QSFs's clients informs the potency of the competitive strategy (ies) adopted. For example, one of the elements of the differentiation strategy is to be innovative so as to improve the quality of service rendered to clients. This implies that quality of service is a reliable means of evaluating organisations that adopt differentiation competitive strategy.

Innovativeness

Innovation is the actual use of a non-trivial change and improvement in a process, product, or system that is novel to the institution developing the change (Blayse and Manley, 2004). Innovativeness in service delivery means that a new service delivery system will have to be developed, employees will have to change the way they work or relate to customers (the client interface), the way IT is used in business processes will change, and a new service concept may also be involved (Hertog and Bilderbeek, 1999). In terms of the adopted competitive strategy(ies) in QSFs, innovativeness in their services thus portends a means of assessing if the adopted strategy is working or not. For example, if focus strategy is adopted in a QSF, how innovative has the adopted focus strategy made the services rendered by the firm? If after adopting any competitive strategy, and the services remain unimproved, and there's a retainment of the old means of service rendition, then such strategy can be tagged non-performing. With this, the level of innovation is a means of evaluating the potency of competitive strategy. The areas of services where Qs and QSFs tend to innovate include data collection, management and monitoring processes (Hardie, Miller, Manley and McFallan, 2005). Similarly, innovation is noticeable in the areas of business process in the delivery of services and in the resources the QSFs bring to their services innovations (Page, Pearson and Pryke, 2001).

Timeliness

Timeliness refers to an occurrence at a suitable and opportuned time (Dictionary.com, 2013). In construction, the three iron triangles of performance include cost, quality and time (Abidin, 2009). Timely completion of construction project is of immense importance to clients, and QSFs; being the professional entity that has their service cutting across the three iron triangles, have a sizeable responsibility of ensure that infrastructure projects are completed to time. QSFs's Bill of Quantities encompasses a time forecast, which is often used as part of the basis for selecting contractors. Also during project post-contract stage, QSFs ensure that financial re-imburement to contractors are tied to project time and duration. Therefore, it is reasonable that timeliness is used to evaluate the potency of adopted strategy (ies) in QSFs. The differentiation strategy emphasises superior use of time as a means of attaining competitiveness. This implies that in evaluating the performance of differentiation strategy, timeliness is a probable and realistic variable.

Cost Reduction

In most cases the downstream impact of the service, for example the capital cost as well as the operations and

maintenance cost over the lifetime of a facility, will depend on how well these professionals carry out their work (CIDB Document, 2005). The question of *how* above refers to the strategy applied and its efficacy. For instance and according to Li and Ling (2012), a firm adopting low-cost strategy improves its competitive stance by lowering its production and marketing costs. This also means that if an organisation achieves cost reduction in production and marketing, then the strategy adopted is effective. For instance, if a QSF adopts low-cost competitive strategy, and still finds that the cost of construction operations, cost of administrative activities and cost of the contracting services remain high; then the strategy adopted needs modification or revision.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research on competitive strategy by Abidin et al. (2011) was the first with respect to QSFs. After the research analysed and affirmed the suitability of the four widely accepted Michael Porter's competitive strategies for QSFs, an evolving process model of competitive strategies for QSFs was developed. This research is an extension of Abidin et al. (2011)'s research by investigating and describing the competitive strategies in QSFs in Nigeria. The first part of the methodology elicits in qualitative terms; the strategy potentials of 74 QSFs in Lagos, Nigeria. This was done in a pilot study to assure that the QSFs included in the second stage of the research have elements of strategy practices in them. Also, the pilot study was done to ensure that information is being sought from the right organisations (QSFs). After the firms were assessed in terms of their missions, vision/objective, internal and external environmental analysis, 15 QSFs qualify for the second and quantitative stage of the research. The second stage of the research design was the questionnaire assessment of the QSFs; with operationalised questions on factors that influence the choice of competitive strategies, the types of competitive strategies and factors used in evaluating the performance of adopted competitive strategies. The overarching goal of the second stage of the research design is to elicit and describe the types of competitive strategy(ies) adopted in the QSFs, and the factor(s) that can be used in evaluating them.

Strategy Potentials of the Selected Firms: A Pilot Study

The unit of analysis in this research is the QSF. Unit of analysis is the entity that is being analyzed in a scientific research (Dolma, 2010). In competitive strategy research, mostly where the unit of analysis is an organisation; like this study, there are some distinct strategy potential(s) expected of the organisation(s) (unit of analysis) of study. For instance, in eliciting the critical strategies for Chinese Architecture/Engineering Consulting firms, Li and Ling (2012) based the choice of unit of analysis on location, size of staff, size of jobs and years of operation. Also, the choice of unit of analysis by Ling and Gui (2009) in conducting the SWOT analysis of consulting firms in China was based on location and size of the firms. The above mentioned strategy potentials can be regarded as less objective in a strategic formulation process, and therefore; the step-by-step strategic management process by El-Kelety (2006) was used in identifying the QSFs that are strategic enough to be considered for this study. The reason for the choice of El-Kelety's model is due to its systematic and procedural approach to strategising as well as the focus of the model on professional service firms. This was done in an initial pilot study where the 74 existing QSFs in Lagos, Nigeria were analysed qualitatively using the strategic management process below. QSFs in Lagos were the choice because the city is the commercial nerve of Nigeria, and according to Fagbemi (2008), 75% of QSFs in Nigeria are located there. A pilot study is a mini-version of a full-scale study or a trial run done in preparation of the complete study (Calitz, 2009), and in the case of this paper, it was done to select the 15 QSFs that have strategic orientation required for this research.

- **Mission:** The mission of an organisation; in form of mission statement describes an organization's purpose, its

customers, its products (often in functional terms, that say what need or needs are being met), and its technology (that is, how it delivers its products or services). Thus, it is the purpose or reason for the organization's existence. The websites of the QSFs in Lagos; as registered with the Quantity Surveyors Registration Board of Nigeria (QSRBN) were assessed. Out of 74 firms, 40 have no functioning website. The thirty four other websites were functioning with meaningful and strategic mission statements, but all could not be selected for this research because they could not justify on other strategic purposes below.

- **Objectives:** Objectives are the end results, goals, or targets that all organizational activities seek to attain, and it cuts across areas such as profitability, service to customers, employee needs and well-being, social responsibility, markets, productivity, product, financial resources, physical facilities, research and innovation, organization structure and activities. It must be categorically stated here that fewer firms of up to 17 have what can be called robust objectives. Mostly, the QSFs' objectives are tagged *visions*. Majorly, the vision statements of the QSFs' are annexed with the mission statements. Out of this 17 QSFs' with vision statements, 15 were eventually selected because the two others could not satisfy on other strategic potentials below.
- **Internal Organizational Analysis and External Environmental Analysis:** Internal organisational analysis is the determining of present status before setting objectives and establishing strategies at the organisational level. A checklist is often drawn to ensure a comprehensive internal evaluation. External environmental analysis is a developing awareness of the present and future external environment by profiling the firm; giving cognizance to opportunities and threats politically, economically, technologically, ecologically and socially. The tendency of QSFs to carry out both internal and external analysis could not be asserted from the websites. Therefore, the management of the 17 firms that show strategic prospects were interviewed to simply give instances of internal and external evaluation they have done in time past. A separate checklist was drawn for both internal and external strategic evaluation potentials and the managers in the QSFs were asked to respond in a semi-structured interview. Exactly 15 of the firms had in the last five years done both internal and external strategic profiling, and were thus selected for the second stage of data collection.

Research Instrument

The research instrument design for this research cuts across both the qualitative and quantitative research approaches. In the initial pilot study carried out to assure on the strategy potentials of the QSFs, interview checklists were drawn to elicit information on strategic organisational analysis that may have been carried out in the QSFs in the past five years. This research ensures that respondents at the managerial level with minimum of five years working experience in the attending firm(s) provided this information. This was done since strategising in organisations is mostly at the managerial level, while the number of years (5years) was to ensure that the respondent(s) have knowledge of what strategic practice may have transpired during the period. The interview checklist was structured into two parts, the first and the second containing questions on the internal and external strategic factors respectively. Since a company's website has to be viewed as part of a strategic plan (Bickerton et al., 2000; Preece and Suhaimi, 2009), this research assessed the websites of the registered QSFs in Lagos, Nigeria to check on their mission and vision/objective statements. There was no structured or tangible instrument in this regard other than visiting the websites one after the other as stated in the QSRBN directory. The QSFs were also not made aware that research information are being sourced from their websites so as to avert any form of impromptu website development. The websites with required information were recorded manually since there were not many of them.

The questions for the second aspect of this research were posed using a well-designed questionnaire. The use of questionnaire was to survey the prevalence and pervasiveness of competitive strategies, the factors influencing their choice and the factors used in their evaluation in QSFs. Yin (2009) states that this approach is best when prevalence and the incidence of a phenomenon is of interest. 15 questionnaires were designed and retrieved for analysis. Each questionnaire was structured into four sections. The first section dwells on the preliminary information on the QSFs and the responders. The questions in the preliminary section were cast to be expressed in frequency terms. The three other sections dwell on the questions posed for this study. The first, are questions on the factors influencing the choice of competitive strategies in QSFs. The factors include four constructs (characteristics of firm's organisation, strategic formulation of the firms, innovation and external consideration). For clarity and robust response, each construct was operationalised into four, four, three and four contents respectively. The second are questions on the types of competitive strategies in the QSFs. There are four strategy constructs (cost leadership, differentiation, focus and growth) used in the research instrument.

The four strategy constructs were operationalised into six, eight, five and six contents respectively. The last, being the questions on the factors used in evaluating the performance of competitive strategies in QSFs include four constructs of innovativeness, quality of service, timeliness and cost reduction in construction operation and administrative expenses. Each was further broken down into five, three, three and four contents respectively. Since the unit of analysis in this research are the QSFs, one questionnaire was sent to each of the selected firms. This was done to prevent multiplicity and polarity in responses from the respective firms. The questionnaire used the 5-point Likert as the scale of measurement. The response options were cast in the range of 5 as 'very high' and 1 as 'very low for the first aspect of the questionnaire and 5 as 'strongly agree' and 1 as 'strongly disagree for the second and third aspects of the questionnaire.

Analysis

As stated earlier, a pilot study was carried out to identify QSFs with strategy potentials/tendencies. Since qualitative information was sought, so was the means of its analysis. The findings of the pilot study (interviews and website assessment) were content analysed. The scope of information required at the piloting stage was minimal and thus no automation was used in the analysis. However and carefully, the information required was noted by ticking; for each of the firm that has the information. The content analysis of the pilot findings and responses was just to develop objective inferences about the subject of interest in this research (competitive strategy potentials), as posited by Kondracki, Wellman and Amundson (2002). In the second aspect of the research, interpretations were based on the empirical analysis performed on the various aspects of the questions and questionnaires. Appropriate statistical models with their respective premise of decisions were employed. Prior to the administration of research questionnaire, it was checked for internal consistency. Internal consistency measures consistency within the instrument and questions how well a set of items measures a particular behaviour or characteristic within the test (Drost, 2011). For questionnaire with several response options (i.e., 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), coefficient alpha is typically used to determine the extent to which items on the test or instrument are measuring the same thing (Miller, 2012).

Coefficient alpha's premise of decision is that; the higher the reliability value (α) the more reliable the measure, and specifically a reliability value of .70 or higher is considered appropriate (Miller, 2012). In this research, the coefficient alpha value (α) was presented for each construct that made up the three objectives. For research objectives 1 and 3 which seek to assess and describe the factors that influence the choice of competitive strategies and the factors used in evaluating the performance of adopted strategies in QSFs, mean item score was used in its analysis. The mean is the average response to an item, and it is computed by adding up the number of points earned for the item, and dividing that total by the number

of respondents giving the earnings (Scorepak, 2005). In interpreting mean score values, NC NOVA (2005) states that by dividing the maximum possible mean score by 2, any score below the resulting number can be considered a relatively low score and any score above the resulting number can be considered a high score. Thus in this research, since the maximum possible mean score is 5.00, the scores lower than its midpoint of 2.50 were deemed not to be both the factors influencing the choice, and factors useful in evaluating the performance of competitive strategies in QSFs. The mean score formula used was as Olanipekun (2012) who similarly used mean score in assessing and describing measurement variables.

The preliminary information aspect of the research questionnaire was analysed using their frequency distribution. Response frequencies are generated by calculating the percentage of responses for each question. The item of each of the preliminary question with the highest percentage was adjudged the preference. The research objective 2 seeks to assess the frequency and effectiveness of competitive strategies. Both provides a robust description of the concept in QSFs. In achieving this, the frequency and effectiveness indexes adopted in a similar competitive strategy research; though in the area of contract bidding was adopted. Tan et al. (2010)'s frequency and effectiveness indexes of the 4 competitive strategies can be calculated according to the following formula below:

$$FI/EI = 100 \times \frac{\sum_{i=1}^5 (N_i \times i)}{5 \times \sum_{i=1}^5 N_i}$$

where FI/EI=frequency and effectiveness indexes and N_i =number of responses for a specific grade i

Abidin et al. (2011) identify quality of service, innovativeness, timeliness and cost reduction as the factors that can be used to evaluate the performance of adopted competitive strategy(ies) in QSFs. To ascertain this proposition in empirical terms, the correlation between the competitive strategies and the identified factors used in evaluating them was carried out using Spearman rank correlation. The Spearman rank correlation is a non-parametric technique for evaluating the degree of association or linear relationship between two independent variables (Gauthier, 2001). The Spearman rank correlation coefficient r_s is the premise of decision where the higher the value of r_s , the higher the level of association between variables. Gauthier (2001) further provides means of testing the significance of correlation; which is by comparing the calculated values to a table of critical values. As stated, if the absolute value of the calculated value is larger than the critical value, then the correlation is significant at the specified significance level. In this research, the correlation or no correlation of the tested relationship was ascertained using the above premise of decision at 95% significance level. This premise of decision is specifically for data responses less than 30, and in this research, the data responses are 15.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Reliability of the Research Instrument

For research objective 1 which has four constructs, the Coefficient alpha values for each of the constructs are (characteristics of firms' organisation = 0.81, strategic formulation of firms = 0.76, innovation = 0.77, external consideration = 0.86). For research objective, with four constructs, the Coefficient alpha values for each of the constructs are (focus strategy = 0.72, differentiation strategy = 0.77, cost leadership strategy = 0.74, growth strategy = 0.79). Innovativeness, quality of service, timeliness and cost reduction are the constructs for measuring the research objective 3, and their Coefficient alpha values are 0.71, 0.80, 0.81 and 0.79 respectively. The Coefficient of alpha values for all the constructs represented are above the Miller (2012)'s threshold of 0.70, indicating that they satisfy on appropriateness of the questions in terms of rhetoric and understanding of meanings.

Cadre of Respondent Quantity Surveyors in the QSFs

Though Junior Quantity Surveyors dominate most of the Nigerian QSFs (Olanipekun, 2012), the questionnaires sent to each of the selected fifteen firms were responded to by Quantity Surveyors cutting across two higher level hierarchical levels. Eight of the respondent Quantity Surveyors are Senior Managers while the rest seven are Middle level Managers. This provides the assurance of quality responses especially since strategies are mostly devised by the top level hierarchies in organisations.

Business Structure of the Selected Quantity Surveying Firms

From the pilot study, it was found that the selected QSFs have been implementing strategic practices, just like any corporate organisation will do. However, from the response to the question on the business structure of the QSFs, the findings reveal that eleven of the QSFs have partnership business structure while the rest four have sole proprietorship business structure. This implies that the QSFs are not corporate business structures. This finding supports Annunike (2011), Aliyu (2011) and Olanipekun, Aje and Abiola (2013). Annunike (2011) states that virtually all the Nigerian QSFs are structured as either sole proprietorship or partnership while Aliyu (2011) states that Most of the QSFs have weak or no corporate structure and best business practice (Aliyu, 2011). Nonetheless, this finding should not undermine the fact that the selected QSFs are strategic in their businesses.

Factors Influencing the Choice of Competitive Strategies in the Selected QSFs

Table 1: Factors Influencing the Choice of Competitive Strategies in QSFs

Factors	Mean Score	Rank
Innovation	4.24	1
Strategic formulation of firms	4.20	2
Characteristics of firms' organisation	3.98	3
External consideration	3.47	4

Table 1 has the result of the analysis of the factors influencing the choice of competitive strategies in the selected 15 strategically positioned QSFs in Lagos, Nigeria. Since the mean scores for the identified factors in Table 1 are above NC NOVA (2005)'s 2.50 mean score threshold of interpreting 5-point Likert scale of measurement, therefore they all inform the choice of competitive strategy (ies) in the selected QSFs. Innovation comes top with a mean score of 4.24, followed by strategic formulation of firms with a mean score of 4.20. Characteristics of firms' organisation and external consideration are ranked 3rd and 4th, with both having mean scores of 3.98 and 3.47 respectively. Therefore, innovation (implementation of a new or significantly improved product, process, a new marketing method, or a new organizational method in business practices, workplace organization, or external relations), characteristics of firms' organization (includes firms' size, location and organisational structure), strategic formulation of firms (the formalized approach adopted in carrying the firm's goals and to gain competitive advantage) and external consideration (concerns outside the firm's boundary prompting the strategic analysis of their environment) influence the choice of competitive strategy (ies) in the selected QSFs.

Each of the identified factors (Table 1) can influence more than one type of competitive strategy. And because their mean across the selected QSFs are significantly higher than the set threshold of 2.5, it could mean that the selected QSFs adopt more than one competitive strategy. For example, Abidin et al. (2011) describe both innovation and characteristics of firm's organisation as good considerations in adopting differentiation and focus strategies respectively. Thus, the possibility that both competitive strategies are adopted in QSFs.

Frequency of Usage and the Effectiveness of the Types of Competitive Strategies in QSFs**Table 2: Frequency/Effectiveness and Ranks of the Types of Competitive Strategies in QSFs**

Types of Competitive Strategy	Number of Respondents Ranking					Mean Score	FI/EI	Rank
	1	2	3	4	5			
Differentiation Strategy	0	0	8	54	57	4.41	88.2	1
Cost Leadership Strategy	3	15	17	23	17	3.48	69.6	2
Growth Strategy	10	15	21	35	23	3.44	68.8	3
Focus Strategy	15	20	16	16	8	2.76	55.2	4
FI denotes Frequency index, EI denotes Effectiveness index								

Table 2 contains the frequency of usage and the effectiveness of the identified types of competitive strategies in the selected QSFs. The findings reveal that the mean, frequency and effectiveness indexes scores have the same order of ranking. The most frequently used and effective type of competitive strategy is differentiation (MS=4.41, FI/EI=88.2%) followed by cost leadership (MS=3.48, FI/EI=69.6%). Growth and focus competitive strategies have (MS=3.44, FI/EI=68.8%) and (MS=2.76, FI/EI=55.2%) respectively in third and fourth place. With the mean scores and frequency and effectiveness indexes of the identified types of competitive strategies greater than the mid-point threshold rule of NC NOVA (2005), this means they are all frequent and effective in the selected QSFs. Thus the selected QSFs operates mixed or hybrid competitive strategy. This is in agreement with Porter (1998) who posits that a firm may be able to pursue more than one competitive strategy simultaneously. El Kelety (2006) cited Murray (1988), Wright (1987) and Miller (1992), who all agreed and argued in favour of hybrid competitive strategy. Their arguments summed up that mixed or hybrid strategies have distinct advantages and that pursuing a single generic strategy may be dangerous, leading to lower performance. El Kelety (2006) further argues that in reality, many firms will choose not just one general strategy, but a combination of strategies since strategic positioning is the process of selecting the optimal mix of the strategic approaches. For the selected QSFs, the implication of their hybrid type of competitive strategy is more of advantages in terms of performance rather than disadvantage.

The evidence, and the implications of each of the type of competitive strategy that made up the hybrid competitive strategy in the selected QSFs cannot be far-fetched. Differentiation strategy is concerned with creating something that is perceived by the buyers/clients as unique or different (Cheah et al., 2007; Murphy, 2011). As a strategy, this implies that the selected QSFs have differentiated their services to occupy superior market position. In Nigeria, it is not uncommon for QSFs to package their Bill of Quantities uniquely. QSFs in Nigeria have also been seen to distinctively re-model common softwares such as MS-EXCEL to suit their respective definitions of ease of bill preparation. Good financial standing branded as favourable reputation among clients is a variable of differentiation strategy. In a research on the management of QSFs in Nigeria, Ogunsemi, Awodele and Oke (2013) find that considerable number of QSFs are involved in buying of shares and bonds. This is a way to boost the financial standing of the QSFs and by extension, the differentiation strategy. Ogunsemi et al. (2013)'s findings include the employment of Accountants in QSFs and the commissioning of External Auditors to audit their accounts. These are ways in which the QSFs distinct themselves within the Quantity Surveying profession.

Cost Leadership strategy focuses its attention on competing on cost (Cheah et al., 2007) and by implication, QSFs applying this strategy will offer fees lower than their competitors to attract the clients (Abidin et al., 2011). To do this, the QSFs innovatively increases service output with minimal efforts and resources (Abidin et al., 2011). An instance of this was reported by Aliyu (2011) stating that practicing QSFs in Nigeria have few employees. This could be a way of lowering administrative costs so as to offer cost reduction to clients. In terms of IT innovation, Ogunsemi et al. (2013) points out a

number of possibilities that have challenged the usual malignity associated with immobility of knowledge and processes of the quantity surveying practices. Examples are the possibilities of preparing BoQ on a mobile phone, schedule of material on a ipad and validating a valuation without physical presence on site. With these, cost reduction are offered to clients due to lessened administrative costs.

Also with growth strategy strategy in the selected QSFs, this implies that they are expanding by moving their services beyond shores of their current location. This also implies that the QSFs are venturing into newer services as well as engaging in new businesses. Reporting the practical evidences of this strategy, Quantity Surveyors and their firms have been known to render cost management service on building projects only in Nigeria, but recently, Dahiru (2013) gives an account of the role of Quantity Surveyors in PPP concession contracts, while Abiodun (2013) further informs that the PPP concession role is on highway civil engineering project. This signals a service diversification and engaging in new business. As means of having their presence beyond the confine of their offices, Ogunsemi *et al.* (2013) reports that QSFs with more than ten years of establishment have been partnering with other firms in Nigeria. Though there are no reported practical evidences of Nigerian's QSFs practices on the global scene, but Oke, Aje and Ibronke (2013)'s research found that elements of globalisation (information transfer, spread of technology, trade agreement and migration pattern) are significant to quantity surveying practice. This means the situations faced globally by quantity surveying practice extend to Nigeria.

The fourth competitive strategy exhibited by the selected QSFs is focus strategy. The implications of this strategy for the QSFs are that they derive their competitive advantage from focusing solely on a particular market niche in terms of size, type of project, geographical location, specific type of clients and employees. In terms of focusing on a specific location, Fagbemi (2008) asserts that 75% of QSFs are located in Lagos, Nigeria. The reason is not unconnected with the fact that Lagos is a business hub in Nigeria and West Africa, and thus it presents business clients and opportunities, even for the QSFs. In terms of reduced but specialist employees, the research Ogunsemi *et al.* (2013) find that majority of QSFs have registered corporate quantity surveyor employees. These are categories of quantity surveyors who have been professionally certified on total competence and skills to render quantity surveying services on infrastructure developments. From the foregoing, the selected QSFs are strategic about their competitiveness considering their use of differentiation, cost leadership, focus and growth competitive strategies individually and hybrid-wise.

Table 3: Factors Used in Evaluating the Performance of Competitive Strategies in QSFs

Factors	Mean score	Rank
Quality of service	4.57	1
Timeliness	4.37	2
Innovativeness	4.00	3
Cost reduction	3.90	4

Table 4: Correlation between the Types of Competitive Strategies and the Factors for Evaluating Them

Types of Competitive Strategy/Factors for Evaluating them	Innovativeness	Quality of Service	Timeliness	Cost Reduction
Focus Strategy	0.267	0.546	0.824	0.123
Differentiation Strategy	0.534*	0.416	0.364	0.344
Cost Leadership Strategy	0.266	0.100	0.994	0.180
Growth Strategy	0.482**	0.353	0.828	0.538

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed),

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The survey result of the analysis of the factors used in evaluating the performance of competitive strategies, as well as the correlation between the types of competitive strategies and the factors used in their evaluation in QSFs are presented in Tables 3 and 4 respectively. The mean scores of the identified factors in Table above are NC NOVA (2005)'s 2.50 mean score threshold of interpreting 5-point Likert scale of measurement, meaning that all the identified factors are used for evaluating the performance of competitive strategies in the selected QSFs. The first important factor for evaluating the performance of competitive strategies in QSFs is quality of service, with the highest mean score of 4.57. Other factors in descending order of importance are timeliness (4.37), innovativeness (4.00) and cost reduction (3.90). As factors for evaluating the performance of competitive strategies QSFs, Quality of service means how much value is derived by clients from the services rendered to them by the QSFs, innovativeness means how much newness or novelty is introduced to the services rendered to clients, timeliness means how much consciousness is inculcated in timely delivery of clients' projects and cost reduction means how much cost consciousness is applied to construction operations, administrative activities and contracting services, all informed by the adopted competitive strategy or strategies. This finding affirms Abidin et al. (2011) who earlier stated that these factors as useable in evaluating whether a competitive strategy is contributing successfully or failingly to the QSFs.

This research went further to elicit which factor is specifically useful in evaluating the performance of the different competitive strategies by carrying out a non-parametric correlation analysis (Table 4). From there, it was found that there were positive correlations between the types of competitive strategies and the factors used in their evaluation, though majority are mostly insignificant at 0.01 and 0.05 levels. The reason for the majority of insignificant correlations may be due to the reduced number of QSFs (15) that participated in the survey. However, there is a significant positive correlations between differentiation strategy and innovativeness ($r = 0.534$) and growth strategy and innovativeness ($r = 0.482$) at 0.05 and 0.01 significant levels respectively. This implies that the more differentiation and growth strategies are increased in QSFs, the more innovative their services will be. This is an affirmative and empirical based linkage between competitive strategies (differentiation and growth) and service innovativeness in QSFs.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Owing to the need to plan strategically and stay relevant in business, QSFs have been acknowledged to react to competitive pressures. The onus then lie on this research to inform on the factors influencing the choice of competitive strategies, the type of competitive strategies and factors used in evaluating the performance of competitive strategies in the Nigerian QSFs. In achieving this, a pilot study was firstly carried out to isolate the QSFs in the Nigerian geographical scope that strategically positioned for the next stage of the study. After carrying out the the assessment of 74 QSFs on strategy potentials of mission statement, organisation objective, internal and external organisation analysis, 15 (20.27%) were adjudged to be strategic enough, a reason for their choice as unit of analysis for the next stage of the study. 15 QSFs out of 74 is low. However, this does not mean that the QSFs which were not selected have no element of strategy and/or strategising in them. For instance, when considering the strategy potential of mission statement, 34 QSFs (45%) qualified, but weren't for other strategy potentials. On the overall, a very low number of QSFs are strategically positioned, even though there were others with feeble elements of strategy and/or strategising in them. In choosing appropriate competitive strategies in QSFs, innovation, strategic formulation of firms, characteristics of firm organisation and external consideration are the factors influencing the choice. Each of these factors are distinctly attuned to influencing different competitive strategies, thus providing an indication that the QSFs may be operating different types of competitive strategies.

This indication was affirmed from the findings from the types of competitive strategies in QSFs, where all the identified competitive strategies are used in driving their competitiveness. This portends that the QSFs operates a hybrid of competitive strategy where all available strategies are adopted. Individually, differentiation competitive strategy is the most pervasive in QSFs, followed by cost leadership, growth and focus competitive strategies respectively. The evaluation of the performance of the competitive strategies followed, with quality of service, timeliness, innovativeness and cost reduction being used in the QSFs. With a view to knowing which evaluation factor is specifically more associated with each of the competitive strategies, a correlation analysis between them was carried out. All the evaluation factors are positively correlated with each of the types of competitive strategy. However, only innovativeness had scientifically significant correlations with differentiation and growth strategies respectively. This means that as differentiation and growth strategies are increased in QSFs, their service innovativeness also increases. Conclusively, this research has been able remove the elusiveness of competitive strategies of QSFs, and therefore insights into how they address and approach competitiveness are evident.

Theoretically, this research is implicative. From Porter (1980)'s competitive strategy theory applicability to organisations, to its applicability to service firms by Porter (2007) and Warzawski (1996), to its applicability in theoretical terms to QSFs by Abidin et al. (2011) and the further extension by this research. The extension provided by this research is the testing of theoretical propositions of the authors above on competitive strategies in QSFs. With this research giving insights into how the selected QSFs address and approach competitiveness in their operating environment, other QSFs can use the information provided to diagnose and advance the scope of their competitiveness drives. Based on the conclusion, this research recommends a holistic application of competitive strategies, comprising the factors influencing their choice, types and factors used in evaluating them. The findings from fifteen (15) QSFs may not provide a generalisable description of competitive strategies of QSFs in Nigeria, thus the limitation of study. Future studies can improve on the selected 15 QSFs.

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